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## **The Deep Dish on “Top Chef”**

*Bravo Culinary Series Tests Contestants’ Prowess with Pizza and Other Chicago Favorites*

From deep-dish pizzas to hot dogs, Chicago is finally getting its culinary due. The city is featured front and center on this season of Bravo's hit show "Top Chef." "Chicago is an awesome city that has a great food tradition," says Tom Colicchio, head judge on the show. "The city we shoot in plays a prominent role in the show, and this season is no different."

In tonight's premiere at 9 o'clock, the 16 chefs competing try to put their own spin on Chicago-style deep-dish pizza.

Chicago chefs on 'Top Chef: Chicago'

Dale Talde, 29

Sous chef at New York's Buddakan who grew up in Chicago and helped open Vong (now VTK).

Stephanie Izard, 31

Former owner and chef of Scylla in Bucktown, now closed.

Valerie Bolon, 32

Kendall College alum working as a personal chef in Chicago.

Two of the chefs competing in the show currently call Chicago home, and another contestant was born here. That doesn't mean that the deep-dish pizza challenge was any easier for them.

Though many Chicagoans might take a pie for granted, making one proved to be no easy task. Half of the contestants stumbled, using too much dough, piling on too many toppings or trying too hard to make something so simple unnecessarily complex.

"Chicago has a food tradition that no other city has," says former "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy" star Ted Allen, a judge on the show. "Chicago-style pizza is an institution, and many of the chefs took considerable liberties with what a pizza is."

Allen, who spent several years living in Chicago and writing about food, knows his way around the kitchens of some of the city's best restaurants.

"I steered the crew toward the finer strip joints," he says. "And when I say strip joints, I'm talking steak, of course."

Allen had been pushing for the show to do a spot at Gibsons, but it ultimately didn't materialize.

"Gibsons is locally owned and full of character," he says. "You sit at a bar and see famous people; there's usually a bag lady there and businessmen in suits with women that you only hope are their daughters. That's Chicago. On top of that, they happen to make one hell of a steak."

Colicchio said he wanted to try more Chicago cuisine but wasn't able to because of the hectic shooting schedule.

"We usually don't start filming the judges' table scenes until 11 p.m., and filming doesn't wrap until 4 a.m.," he says. "There aren't a lot of places open at that hour."

Colicchio's dining experiences were limited to breakfast, brunch and lunch at places including Blackbird, LuLu's and Topolobampo -- whose sister restaurant, Frontera Grill, was recently recognized as the outstanding restaurant in the United States by the James Beard Foundation.

Lively restaurant scene

"Most of the places I went, I knew the chef," he says. "Based on what I know of the chefs in Chicago, there are some great things going on here."

It wasn't all upscale dining, though. Colicchio says he made sure to sample some of the traditional dishes the city is famous for.

"I did have that beef with peppers -- Italian beef," Colicchio says. "It was pretty good."

Simple items like that come into play in tonight's final challenge. The 16 contestants were asked to put their own spin on traditional dishes: Eggs Benedict, souffle, Chicken Piccata, etc.

Just because the show is starting off with simple dishes, that doesn't mean Colicchio thinks Chicago cuisine isn't cutting-edge.

All in the molecules

"Molecular gastronomy is this huge avant-garde movement that takes food to its molecular level to create new effects and tastes, and it has been embraced in Chicago," Colicchio says.

Grant Achatz's Alinea and Homaro Cantu's Moto have put the cuisine on the map. French chemist Herve This, who coined the term with the late Hungarian physicist Nicholas Kurti, hosted the first seminar on molecular gastronomy held in the United States in Chicago last year.

While the judges were tight-lipped about what goes on this season, you can probably expect molecular gastronomy to come up at some point. Two of this season's contestants, Andrew D'Ambrosi and Richard Blais, have made names for themselves practicing molecular gastronomy in New York and Atlanta, respectively. Tonight's episode even seems to hint at a rivalry brewing between the two.

"If nothing else, Andrew is a fun guy to watch," Allen says. "He has such a passion for cooking and it manifests itself in great food and some extreme facial expressions."